



When a man with

far above average intelligence
far above average athletic skill
better than average good looks
a decent amount of common sense
an engaging personality
a Toyota car
the governor's pool table
a 38 caliber pistol
a new pair of shoes
a lifetime inheritance & a
brace of good friends
thinks life is not worth
living,

you wonder what it is
he missed.

Uncle Jim

A little kid in New York City
my father away at war
Uncle Jim would come around
late at night
fall on the floor
wrap his arms around his head.
He had migraines
& a drinking habit.
My mother gave him aspirin
wet towels across his head
I'd fall asleep in the easy chair,
curious but not sorry.

Uncle Jim ran little stores
bought them from Italians
& Poles
who couldn't make it work
made it work
made these great ham & cheese
sandwiches
with kosher pickles.

The last store he made work
for five years
then disappeared in New York City.

He surfaced ten years later
skin & bones
covered with bruises & scars
delirious & pleading
to be made a priest.

The relatives
put him in a hospital
with a Catholic sounding name
Saint something or other
gave him glasses
& yanked out his teeth,
put twenty pounds on his bones
before he died.

The Coach

was short & squat
an Indian they said
never spoke a word to me
in the two years I was there,
knew I drank & smoked &
screwed around.

Landing in that
new town with the
wrong foot forward,
never gaining balance,
fights suspensions
midnight cruises,

& then that spring I
ran the mile,
just got on the bus
with the team,
got on the track &
ran, barely moving by the
end, lousey time & I
puked after I
finished but I
finished.

Down in the locker room they
laid it on, for one whole
week they
laid it on,
& then the coach
slammed a locker with his
fist to create silence.

Lay off! he said.

The Place Where I Run

I run along the
Yakima River,
along a dirt road,
thru trees & across a
large meadow dotted with
tiny lakes.

The woods are
full of cows & horses &
jackasses that
peer out at me
from behind trees
as I run by.

At the end of the
meadow is a
hill of gravel.

I run up the hill &
look around me at the
barren hills that
hold the valley,
the snow-capped mountains
further back.

All the animals
in the field
look my way.

Anybody who eats icecream
like you do
must know where it's
at.

I just don't see
the sense, drinking
beer like you do,
I'm happy with this
icecream here,
don't need all that
beer she said sitting
cross-legged on the
floor, holding a
lungful of smoke
from her
mentholated cigarette,
flicking the ashes into the
icecream.

Belsaas brought the
wood, a liberal cord he
called it, dumped it
all over the backyard.

Stood up against his truck &
rolled a cigarette,
talked about his
farm & how he hoped
it snowed before the
freeze set in, about
the state of the nation,
how he'd just as soon
drive horse & buggy as a
car, how the power shortage
was a blessing in
disguise, people move
too fast &
want too much,
why he'd just read
that very morning that they
were running out of
toilet seats,
a turmoil over toilets,
ain't that some shit?

A small hard man,
leaning up against his
truck, smoking roll-yr-owns,
in no hurry.

This business of
growing,
this business of
developing from
style to style,
progress they call
it, a poet
finding his way.

Dancing to an-
other man's
drum I call
it, the most
terrible of all
cons, slamming
each door shut
behind you,
walking a
straight line
into the

trap.

Music

When I was 5
I danced to records
that my
grandmother played.

When I was 8
I sang praise to
God while a
nun with a
yardstick
hovered over
every
sour note.

When I was 10
I was made to
stand before a
class & try to
sing a song I
knew quite well
in some sort of
coded do-re-me.

When I was 12
they gave me
cello lessons.
An old man in a
stuffy blind-pulled
room
gave me sheets of
paper with
cryptic lines &
markings that I was
supposed to
translate into
music

When I was 17 I
dropped out of
school, left
God, stopped taking
lessons &
remembered my
grandmother.

I got a
key of C
harmonica &
began to play.

Old Friends

are like
old cars with
built in
obsolescence

needing
tune-ups &
over-hauls
new tires
spark
plugs & points

& if you
don't take
care of them
service them
charge their
batteries &
check their
oil,

why you may
find yourself
stranded on the
desert or a
mt. pass in
winter or
standing dead still
at midnight on a
slow curve in the
freeway.

The Last Angry Young Man, 1973

Paul has this
big drooping
Hungarian
mustache
& a black felt
saggy beret
that he
puts on his
head like a
signal when he's
getting drunk,
pulls it
down over
one eye &
heads for the
pool hall.

One night he
put an
onion on the
pool table & a
pool shark with a
midget brain
banged it
straight into the
corner pocket.

Paul sat there
straight backed
like a
Cossack
with his
beret hanging
in his
eyes & his
mug of beer
firm in his
fist, exchanging
glares with all the
pool sharks.

Once he sat
eye ball to
eye ball with a
shipping clerk &
exchanged Latin prayers
until the
shipping clerk
faltered &

then Paul went on to
recite 20 poems in
Latin, tugging at his
beret &
mustache.

Another time
after a
5th of Scotch
while
listening to a
rock band at a
biker hangout he
stood on the
table & declared
music was a
giant eraser,
opiate of the
masses.

They were just about to
come for him when he
picked up his
5 string
banjo &
played
10 Woodie Guthrie
songs in a
row, just to
show them
he said,
clutching his
beer,
tugging his
mustache,

angry about
something.

There's something
strange
going on here.

I keep waking up
with loose lines
floating thru my
head.

They repeat themselves
over & over like
fingers
clawing at a
high ledge.

Something strange &
exciting. Like un-
expected
dividends for a
long forgotten
loan.

Almost like a
pension.

Confession

Bless me Father,
for I have sinned
is what you had to say.

It took some doing,
some getting used to.
some time to convince
yourself that it was
really true.

At first I made it up,
I had myself
torture animals,
break into stores,
wish evil on my mother,
think filthy thoughts.

In a few years
it was all true.

The Neighbor Girl

First saw her riding
on her bike when I was
raking leaves,
hello I said as she
went riding by.

Her eyes met mine
demurely lowered
hello & she was gone
leaving a trace of herself
behind, the eternal
imprint on my mind
my senses, the thing
about her eyes, her voice,
her slim body moving
rhythmic on the bike --
the woman thing.

& then I saw her
yesterday, playing with
some children in the
yard, pulling toy cars
over imaginary roads.

She was just a child.

The Magician

Dave was short & stocky
so they put him in tanks
& he drove one from Normandy
to Berlin
with a cigar stuck between
his sour teeth.

Meanwhile back home
his wife Mary
my mother's sister
(a family of 12
with a drunk for a father),
Mary who had dancing slippers
when there wasn't bread to eat,
Mary who had dreams & visions
& tension headaches,
Mary had this other guy's baby.

I remember them coming
to live with us,
remember that tightness
on my mother's face,
remember that the baby was
a girl, tiny as a rat
& ugly, and the guy was
big, really big,
bigger than my father
who was off to war
& six foot one.

This guy wore
suits & overcoats,
white scarves
thick shoes
& silk socks.

He could bounce a quarter
off the wall
& catch a silver dollar.

He could make anyone laugh,
even my mother
who hated his guts.

He disappeared
when Dave came back,
talking war over quarts
of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

That was years ago.
Now Mary is an alcoholic,
the daughter grew up sluggish,
& Dave beats them both.

I've been gone for 20 years,
but I'll never forget that guy
who turned quarters into silver dollars:
It was a dirty trick.

The first time I
played basketball

I was already in the
3rd grade, the 3rd grade &
the third school,
bouncing from New York to
Spokane to
Cheyenne,
the kid said
Do You Want to Play?
& I said
Sure.

I got out there &
took the ball,
knocked over half the
players running with it
to the far end of the
court, made a
touchdown.

When I turned around
everyone was
standing still &
staring.

Then
pandemonium
broke loose.

Santa Cruz Poets

There are these
poets in
Santa Cruz
writing about
sunsets &
sunrises about
rocks heaving up on their
haunches about the
trees & the oceans & the
great slab of
sky
not a word about de-
capitated
girls dis-
membered
boys old men
shot dead on their
lawns &
campers with their
skulls bashed in.

To read these poets,
you'd think it was a
swell place to
live.

We Have Not Yet Sold Out To The Metric System

Him being a math professor
& her being a whirling dervish
you can see why it's coming
unravelling after 10 years,
but he's not as cut & dry as she
described him & she's not as
big a pile of sentiment as he'd
like to think. I know because of
the way she suffers her own
impression on people & the way he
got so excited talking about
number systems, systems of 10 & 12
& 20, Egyptians & Babylonians
& the Renaissance Man,
slamming his fist into his palm
& exclaiming,
"We have not yet sold out to the
metric system!"
& the puzzled look on her face
across the room.

A Death In The Family

The boy is 18 & sits in the
room all day playing records
& smoking dope.

His mother comes home from work,
pauses in the foyer,
hears the music coming
from his music upstairs.

She puts down her packages
on the hallway table
& goes up the steps,
taking off her gloves
as she does. She is wearing
stockings & heels & her
cheeks are red from the
fresh air. Her husband has been
dead six years.

Our Friend Jane

Our friend Jane

likes Jesus Christ Super Star &
Erik Satie, plays them for us
when we come over,
exhibits the exact same
amount of pleasure every time;
has children's books in by her bed,
Woolworth pictures on the walls,
has never been laid &
works in research,
dopes up dogs &
cuts their kidneys out.

She wears some kind of
chin strap when she
sleeps because she
grinds her teeth together.

Her father is a VP for
Mobile Oil,
found her in an orphanage
when she was 3,
gave her a Mustang & a
case of gin when she
turned 21.

Calls her his baby.
His precious.
His one & only.

What is poetry doing,
getting itself processed
thru so many institutions?

A flash on
wild horses
stretching out across a
mesa, jeeps & helicopters
& radar narrowing the circle.

Marlboro men.
Ready-made disaster.

-- John Bennett

Ellensburg WA